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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI

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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000152

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DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA, AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/31/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM GG

SUBJECT: REPUBLICANS VOTE FOR SEPARATE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION PARTY LIST

REF: TBILISI 125

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 30, opposition leader and Republican Party Chairman David Usupashvili told the Ambassador that the Republican party will not join the United National Council of Opposition (UNC) on a joint party list for the coming parliamentary elections. Former presidential candidate, MP Levan Gachechiladze, asked the Republicans to stay with the UNC and join the UNC party list, but the Republicans decided to run on their own. Usupashvili acknowledged the risk of the decision. He expects criticism from UNC members and President Saakashvili's supporters alike. In the end, Usupashvili said his party could not continue to pursue the one-track agenda put forth by some members of the UNC, which consists simply of getting rid of Saakashvili. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 30, opposition leader and Republican party Chairman David Usupashvili told the Ambassador that his party will not join the UNC on a joint party list for the coming parliamentary elections. Usupashvili said this was a difficult, risky decision for his party. They are not severing all of their ties or participation with the UNC. However, the Republicans felt they could neither uphold their party's values nor pursue its future by being tied to the UNC party list during the election. Usupashvili said his party believes the UNC needs stronger leadership. He said they are unsure if UNC leader and former presidential candidate, MP Levan Gachechiladze, can "keep the UNC together."

¶3. (C) Gachechiladze had encouraged the Republicans, and specifically Usupashvili, to stay with the UNC. The UNC offered the Republicans 12 spots of the first 50 for the UNC's party list. Usupashvili told the Ambassador that the Republicans have around 5 percent support in the country. In a best-case scenario they can reach out to disaffected voters that previously supported Saakashvili and win up to 15 percent of the vote. Usupashvili said that his party is also prepared for the worst, whereby they would not gain 5 percent of the vote and lose all representation in Parliament. (Note: For the parliamentary election, 100 of 150 seats will be assigned by party list. In a nationwide vote, whereby a voter can select one party, the parties which receive more than 5 percent of the popular vote will be assigned a corresponding number of seats to the percentage they receive. Each party submits a party list in advance, whereby their MP candidates are rank-ordered how they will fill seats won in the election. End note.)

¶4. (C) Usupashvili expects that members of the UNC will harshly criticize the Republicans for not running on the UNC party list. He also anticipates the media and ruling National Movement (UNM) will present this as a huge split in the opposition and use the attention to press the UNM's

political advantage. He said some people may explain the split by calling the Republicans "a tool" of the USG. He thought that news of the Republican decision may get out before he departs for Washington, DC on February 2.

¶5. (C) In the end, Usupashvili said his party could not continue to pursue the one-track agenda put forth by some members of the UNC. Their focus on obtaining two-thirds of Parliament and ousting Saakashvili is contrary to his party's vision of Georgian government. Still, Usupashvili acknowledged that challenges remain. He believes that if the parliamentary election is truly fair, no party will end up with more than 50 seats (of the 150 total.) Usupashvili continues to hope that Parliamentary Speaker Burjanadze can develop more independence from the UNM, as this would help ease the transition toward a Parliament and government no longer dominated by only one party. However, Usupashvili noted that key members of the UNM are threatened by any loss of power, and Burjanadze is not strong enough yet to make her own way.

¶6. (C) In a brief update on the status of negotiations that he has been leading (reftel) with Burjanadze, Usupashvili said that no meetings were scheduled, but he would see her the night of January 30. Usupashvili said it would be clear by January 31 which of the opposition's demands the UNM would agree to, what they would not, and where there was room for negotiation. Usupashvili said that some negotiations would be harder now, due to public rhetoric used by both the opposition and the UNM. He said that the negotiations will likely require international help to ensure follow-through. He also warned that he expected there to be opposition demonstrations beginning on February 15, and would continue indefinitely, if the negotiations with the government have

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not concluded.

Comment

¶7. (C) This is the first (expected) fissure of the UNC. Time will tell whether the UNC can survive as an opposition force after the departure of one of its largest (and most moderate) component parties. Usupashvili has privately confided to us over the past two months the serious misgivings within the Republican party (as well as his own) over being so closely allied with much more radical parties. The Republican party decision will now force other members of the opposition to decide with whom they will ally for the elections. They will no longer be able to ride on the Republicans' coattails as many had undoubtedly planned.

TEFFT